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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002391

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KJUS](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: KIDNAPPERS RELEASE IRISH PRIEST AFTER ONE MONTH OF CAPTIVITY

REF: A. MANILA 2220 (IRISH PRIEST IS LATEST FOREIGNER
KIDNAPPED IN MINDANAO)
[B](#). MANILA 2198 (CHARGE DISCUSSES PEACE PROSPECTS)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, for reasons 1.4 (B) & (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Irish priest Michael Sinnott was released by his kidnappers in the early morning hours of November 12, one month after his abduction in Pagadian City in the southern island of Mindanao. While no group has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping, Philippine prosecutors have filed charges against as yet unnamed "rogue" members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The mainstream MILF command denies that any of its members were involved in the abduction and noted that Philippine officials have publicly credited an MILF Task Force for assisting in the peaceful release of Sinnott. A top Philippine official responsible for the government-MILF peace process told us he had intervened with the MILF to push for Sinnott's release, telling the MILF the peace process was at stake; he believed the MILF did not release Sinnott immediately upon receiving him from his captors. While the complete circumstances of the priest's release remain unclear, Philippine officials expressed their doubts that any ransom was paid. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Michael Sinnott, a 79 year-old Colombian missionary, was released by his kidnappers in the early morning hours of November 12. He had been abducted on October 11 (Ref A). At the time of his kidnapping, Philippine authorities speculated that a local commander with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was behind the kidnapping, an allegation which MILF officials strongly denied. In an October 16 meeting with MILF leader Murad Ibrahim, the DCM urged the MILF to do all it could to help secure Father Sinnott's rapid release (Ref B). The DCM relayed to Murad the extreme concern of the Irish Ambassador regarding Father Sinnott's ill health and need for heart medication. She stressed that the MILF had a role to play in helping the situation and preventing terrorist and kidnap-for-ransom groups from exploiting the lack of security.

[1](#)3. (U) During a press conference at a Philippine Air Force Base in Manila soon after his release, Father Sinnott, who is affectionately known as "Father Mike" by his parishioners, appeared in good spirits and thanked those who prayed for him during his ordeal. In fluent Tagalog, Father Sinnott said that, despite his recent ordeal, his commitment to the Mindanao people remained strong and expressed his wish to return to his rectory in Pagadian City. He also said he believed that he was not kidnapped by the MILF, but rather "members of a lost command led by a certain 'Pikay.'" At the same press conference, senior Philippine military and government officials said they doubted any ransom was paid for his release. They also publicly credited an MILF Task Force for its assistance in the safe release of Father Sinnott.

14. (C) In a November 13 conversation, Department of Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Rafael Seguis, Chairman of the Philippines, Peace Panel, told the Embassy he had personally interceded with the MILF on November 10 to secure the release of Sinnott, and that the priest had been released to him in the city of Zamboanga. Seguis said he believed the MILF had secured custody of Sinnott from his kidnappers on November 9 or 10, but had not immediately released him. U/S Seguis said he had reluctantly become involved in this matter because of the extreme importance the Philippines government attached to Sinnott,s case. Seguis told the MILF the peace process was at stake -- it would be impossible to proceed with peace talks if it appeared the MILF bore responsibility for the kidnapping. When U/S Seguis spoke to Embassy officials after Sinnott,s release, he refrained from speculating about the extent of MILF responsibility for the kidnapping, saying he hoped to have no further involvement in investigating the abduction; the peace process should remain separate from such issues. Seguis also added that he believed the MILF would never cooperate with law enforcement efforts in targeting the kidnappers.

15. (C) COMMENT: The details of who kidnapped Father Sinnott and how he was released remain murky. Having filed charges against "rogue" MILF members, the Philippine government will have a chance to make its case. The kidnapping and allegations of MILF involvement come at a sensitive time in the ongoing peace negotiations. Philippine officials are expected to travel to Kuala Lumpur for further informal talks with the MILF on November 16, and both sides have privately confided to the Ambassador that they are currently expediting their efforts to conclude a peace agreement before the June

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2010 end of President Arroyo's term.
KENNEY